

Ancient Indian Architecture.

At a meeting of the British Academy held on Wednesday, Professor A. A. MacDonnell, Boden Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Oxford, Fellow of the Academy, read a paper on “The Evolution of Ancient Indian Architecture” Lord Reay presided.

Professor MacDonnell said that, owing to the total lack of work of an historical character in India from the rise of its literature (c. 1500 B. C.) to the Mahomedan conquest (c. 1000 A. D.) the study of archaeology was relatively more important in India than in perhaps any other country. But the archaeological remains had been steadily disappearing from the face of the land. Their destruction had been arrested by the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act passed by Lord Curzon in 1904. The lecturer had during a recent tour of six months in India many opportunities of observing the beneficial effects of the Act. His paper traced through a period of nearly 2000 years the development of Indian architecture from its earliest forms down to the fixed types of late ages. In the pre-Buddhistic period architecture was wooden, there being no temples or carved images of gods. The use of brick first appeared in the fifth century B. C., and from the middle of the third century B. C. the Buddhists began to build in stone.

BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE.

The history of Buddhist architecture might be divided into three periods – 250 B. C, 50 A. D., 50-350 A. D., 350-650 A. D. There were three classes of buildings – stupas (topes), chaitya, (assembly halls) churches, monasteries. The stupa, a development of the low sepulchral mound of earth, was originally a hemispherical structure erected to enclose relics of Buddha; on the top was an ornament (called a tee), ending in one or more umbrellas. It was shown how by successive stages both the stupa and the tee were elongated so as to assume the shape of a tower; the former then became attenuated, while the tee grew in height, the umbrellas becoming roofs, till it reached its final development in the nine storeyed Chinese pagoda, in which the stupa portion had disappeared. The professor then traced the history of the assembly halls, wagon headed structures with aisles and an apse, under which was placed a small stupa as an object of veneration. The earliest were rock-cut specimens dating from the third century B. C. and obvious stupa as an object of veneration. The stupa, originally quite plain, had in later centuries a figure of Buddha carved on its front, and finally (about 660 A. D.) became a hollow cell with the figures inside. This marked the transition to Hindu architecture, in two early specimens of which the cell was semicircular at the back and square respectively. The monasteries originally consisted of a square hall surrounded by a number of sleeping cubicles. Rock cut specimens alone survived, there being altogether about 900. In the first period no figure sculpture appeared and only towards its end four pillars supporting the ceiling were introduced. In the second period the number of pillars was gradually increased from 12 to 28 and a sanctuary containing a figure of Buddha was introduced at the back of the hall. The latest specimens at Ellora formed a transition to the earliest Hindu example from which they were hardly distinguishable.

THE DRAVIDIAN STYLE.

All the evidence available pointed to Hindu religious architecture being derived from earlier Buddhist types. The oldest specimens dated from about 600 A. D. Two styles could be clearly distinguished, each showing a definite type from the beginning – the Dravidian or South Indian, and the Indo-Aryan or North Indian. The Dravidian temple was derived from the Buddhist monastery. Its plan was a square base containing the cell in which the image was kept; the cell was surmounted by a pyramidal tower, always divided into storeys and surmounted by a small dome either circular or pyramidal. The later Dravidian temples stood in a court surrounded by a wall, a special feature of which was the Gopuram, or great gateway, which was opposite the temple and was surmounted by a storeyed tower resembling that of the shrine itself. The best specimen was the great temple at Tanjore, erected in 1025 A. D. In still later specimen successive surrounding courts were added, each with its Gopuram. These gateways increased in size and height as one proceeded outwards and thus entirely obscured the tower of the central shrine. The most notable example of this defect was the Srirangam temple near Trichinopoly, the largest in India. A feature of these South Indian temples is their tanks surrounded by colonnades. The great temple of Ramesvaram had magnificent corridors, one of them 700 ft. in length. These temples had very elaborate pillars, which by about 1300 A. D. acquired a permanent type with conventionalized animals and riders affixed to them. A variety of the South Indian style was the Chalukyan, the best specimens of which belonged to the 12th and 13th centuries A. D.

THE INDO-ARYAN STYLE.

The Indo-Aryan style was found only north of the 20th degree of latitude. Here the square cell was surmounted by a curvilinear spire with a vertical band running up each face, the top finished off with a fluted ornament somewhat flattened. In the earliest specimens a porch was added in front of the cell, but was not essential. The spire, though curved, was square in section. The earliest specimens were found at Bhubaneswar in Orissa, beginning about 600 A. D., and coming down to 1100 A. D. A feature in the evolution of the Northern temples was the gradual increase in the number of the porches to four. The origin of the Indo-Aryan spire had always been a puzzle to archaeologists. It could not have any connexion with the pyramidal Dravidian tower, nor with the long wagon headed Buddhist assembly hall, which had no suggestion of a spire about it. Its prototype was to be found in the stupa. By the end of the Buddhist period, the stupa had become a hollow cell with a square base and an elongated dome. In the Indo-Aryan tower the dome was further elongated and the corners of the square base were carried up to the top on the curvilinear face, the horizontal section of which thus became square also.

- I. N.
